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Aviation Pioneers of the Outback of WA

June 27, 2020 By [Moya Sharp](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

Aviation Pioneers of Outback Western Australia – First Sixty Years by John Pritchard – Part 1

Introduction

In the 100 year anniversary of the passing of legislation by the Australian Parliament in 1920 to regulate aviation in Australia, this document reflects back on the beginnings of aviation and the achievements attained over the first 60 years of scheduled and unscheduled air services to the outback of Western Australia.

The world today has almost reached the point where in the outback and remote parts of WA, the notion of flight has penetrated the minds of most human beings. Very few of us have not at least seen an aircraft or an image of one in their lifetime and thus, most have some basic understanding of how they work. Many have however not had the experience of riding in one.

Now think about a world where the flying was only done by natural creatures like birds and insects. This was a world where human transport was by horse, boat or train and what a different slower world it would have been. Travel from Perth to London by ship then took some weeks or months, depending on the vessel/weather, in what aircraft can now do in around 17/18 hours non stop.

Early aviation concepts and innovation

Humans originally began to turn their minds to discover the qualities contained in certain shaped sticks and objects. With this, they found that they could use them to catch food and these became spears, bows/arrows and boomerangs etc. This form of science eventually moved on to become known as aerodynamics. Progress was slow at first but it also included some anecdotal accidental flight attempts along the way which unfortunately for those involved, didn't end that well.

The Boomerang

One of the major early advances in this field was the boomerang which contrary to popular belief, did not necessarily originate in Australia. Historical traces of boomerang type devices in their various forms have been found throughout the world. Boomerangs are considered by many to be the earliest "heavier-than-air" flying machines invented by human beings. Australian Aboriginal boomerangs have been found as old as ten thousand years old, but older hunting type boomerangs have been discovered throughout Europe. The famed King Tutankhamen of Egypt for example had an extensive collection of boomerangs over 2000 years ago.

More Recent Years

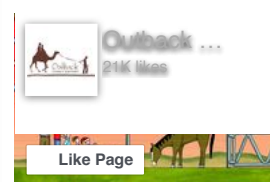
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This limited ad hoc interest in flight continued on unchanged for many years until near the time of the industrial revolution (1700's) when humans first seriously put their minds to the question of how they might fly like a bird. But they had little real understanding of what was involved and what changes to human activity their discoveries would make. There are anecdotal reports of flight attempts such as in the year 559 AD when several prisoners in Asia were forced to launch themselves from a tower attached to a kite as an experiment. All except one died and sadly, the lone survivor was later executed.

World Recorded Aviation Firsts

Whilst a number of unmanned flights and those carrying animals were recorded as happening in early 1783, the first recorded lighter than air manned flight by a person occurred in France by chemistry and physics teacher **Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier** in a tethered **Montgolfier hot air balloon** on 15/10/1783 for a flight of nearly four minutes. About a month later, on 21/11/1783, he and the Marquis d'Arlandes, a French military officer, made the first free ascent in a hot air balloon. The pair flew from the center of Paris to the suburbs, about 5.5 miles (9 km), in 25 minutes.

The first recorded heavier than air flight happened in 1853 by an unnamed boy who rode as passenger in an uncontrolled glider flown by **Sir George Cayley** who was a 6th Baronet, an English engineer, inventor, and aviator. He is one of the most important people in the history of aeronautics. Many consider him to be the first true scientific aerial investigator and the first person to understand the underlying principles and forces of flight.



Photo - Wikipedia

According to the Smithsonian Institution and Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI), the **Wright Bros (Orvil and Wilbur)** made the **first** sustained, controlled, **powered** heavier-than-air manned **flight** at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, USA, four miles (8 km) south of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on 17/12/1903. However, some have tried to discredit this information with statements about a German immigrant named Whitehead flying such an aircraft in USA in 1901.



Photo - Wikipedia



Flying in the years leading up to World War 1 in 1914.

The development of aircraft initially happened mainly in the industrialized nations of the era in Europe such as United Kingdom, France, Italy and Germany with USA, China and Japan also contributing some early designs. A significant development came when the Australian **Lawrence Hargrave** invented the **box kite** and some man-carrying experiments were carried out both in Australia at Stanwell Park Beach, NSW and also in the United States of America.

The first powered aircraft flight in Australia took place on 18 March 1910 by Harry Houdini in a Voisin biplane at Diggers Rest in Victoria.

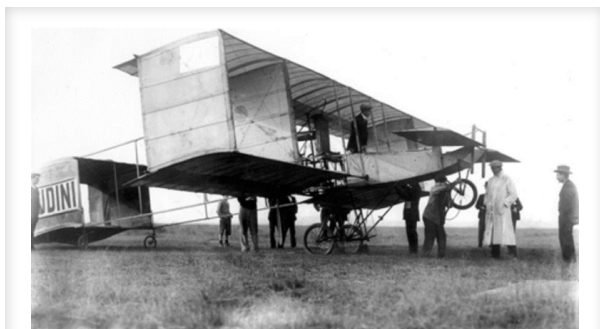


Photo - Wikipedia

The first aircraft to fly in WA was a Bristol Boxkite flown by Mr Joseph J Hammond from Belmont Park Racecourse. After his demonstration flights, he subsequently sold aircraft number 11 to Mr W E Hart. Hart then taught himself to fly in this aircraft and in December 1911, obtained the first pilot's licence issued in Australia. He flew the Boxkite extensively until it was finally destroyed in the last of a series of crashes.

Mr Arthur Geere and an initial group of four students from the Kalgoorlie School of Mines formed a syndicate called the Kalgoorlie Aeroplane Syndicate in 1913 with the purpose of building an aeroplane. The aircraft was assembled in a number of places around Kalgoorlie as the size of the aircraft grew and from 16 to 23 April 1915, it was placed on public display in the Kalgoorlie Town Hall in Hannan Street. The aircraft was then transported to the Coolgardie racecourse in May 1915 where it made its maiden flight by Mr Geere. The aircraft on a later flight landed in the main street of Coolgardie but crashed on its way back to Kalgoorlie. The aircraft was then repaired and flown to Perth (via publicity stops along the way) to conduct various flying displays. Ultimately, it was involved in another crash and the only known part of it to survive today is the propeller which was later hung on the wall at the Royal Aero club of WA at Jandakot Airport.



Photo -Wikipedia Kalgoorlie Aeroplane Syndicate launching
Coolgardie 1915

By the start of World War 1, the basic concepts of flight had been sorted out and very basic observer types of aircraft were being manufactured. However, the types of flying carried out consisted mainly of flying displays and local joy rides rather than transport from A to B. In the beginning there were no formal aerodromes so these flights mainly used ovals and race tracks which were suitable and large enough to serve as aerodromes. The types of aircraft



being created were similar to the Sopwith Pup and later Sopwith Camel (from 1917) which were manufactured in UK.



Sopworth Camel



Sopworth Pup

Effects of World War 1 1914 -1918

This pushed the development of aircraft design and engines forward and new advancements were made in the war effort on both sides of the conflict although aircraft did not play as large a part in that conflict as they did in World War II. Some of these UK made aircraft later had various armaments fitted to them and saw action during World War 1 with British/allied forces in the main in both land based and naval operations (including HMAS Sydney and HMAS Australia using borrowed aircraft from British ships in trials). Aircraft manufactured by the opposing forces also developed and at times overtook UK developments in capability, thus forcing further improvement.

Early Regulation of Aviation in Australia 1901 - 1920

Despite being recognized as an independent nation in 1901, by the end of World War 1, Australia did not have it's own Air Navigation Act to regulate aviation within its borders as it was obviously not a pressing issue at that important time. These issues during the years between nationhood and up to 1920 (plus a changeover period of time) were effectively regulated based on the rules prescribed for British aircraft. Consequently, we see photos of aeroplanes in Australia from that era with their registrations starting with the British nationality code letter "G" followed by an "A", rather than the current Australian code starting with "VH" as we know it today. (see photo below of an aircraft just constructed in 1924 at Maylands, WA). In 1929, Australia first started to use the "VH" nationality code and the example aircraft below would have become VH-UDZ.



Photo - Geoff Goodall



Aviation during the years 1919 to 1920 in Western Australia

During these years, flying operations consisted mainly of private flying, aerial displays and joy rides, some of which tended to be a lucrative form of revenue raising for the aircraft operators. Aircraft then gradually began to be imported in increasing numbers to be assembled and this started to improve public awareness of the aeroplane, aviation in itself and aircraft operations.



Major Norman Brearley's two Avro 504Js were shipped to Fremantle on board the Port Napier, arriving in July 1919. Here they are being assembled at the Belmont Racecourse in Perth at the end of that month. Both were powered by 100hp Gnome Monosoupapes rotary engines

Photo – Geoff Goodall



One of the Avro 504Js at Kalgoorlie Racecourse during a joyriding tour to the Goldfields

Photo – Geoff Goodall

Passing of Commonwealth Legislation relative to Aviation from 1921 onwards

The Commonwealth Air Navigation Act finally came into effect with on 28 March 1921 after being passed by the Australian Parliament in 1920. Regulatory control of civil aviation in Australia became vested in the Civil Aviation Branch of the then Department of Defence. The Branch was staffed by several very experienced ex WW1 pilots and led by Lt Col Horace Clowes Brinsmead as Controller of Civil Aviation.



**Lt. Col. H.C. Brinsmead,
O.B.E., M.C.
First Controller of Civil
Aviation, 1920-1933.**

(Photo: CAHS collection)

Photo – Wikipedia

Other initial staff were as follows, supplemented by others as the role of the organization increased:

- Mr F W Follett (Superintendent of Aircraft)
- Mr E C Johnson (Superintendent of Aerodromes)
- Mr E J Jones (Superintendent of Flying Civilian Operations)



Air Navigation Regulations were then over time issued under the Act to provide for the registration, maintenance and periodical examination of aircraft, licensing of aerodromes, examination/ licensing of personnel engaged in flying plus the rules of the air. The above mentioned staff of the Civil Aviation Branch were initially heavily involved in the inspection and testing of the few pilots and aircraft in Australia at that time. Work was also done with local government organisations/others on the selection of some initial suitable sites for aerodromes.

Later on in 1937, the issue of the Australian Constitution came to impinge on the Air Navigation Act and its attendant Regulations. It was viewed by some at that time that legally, the Constitution did not provide for the Commonwealth to regulate on aviation issues in respect of operations totally within a state of Australia. To try to overcome this, a referendum was held in Australia during 1937. The result was that whilst a majority of people voted for the proposal, the majority of states did not. Consequently, the referendum proposal did not succeed. The States of Australia each subsequently then passed their own legislations to give authority to the Commonwealth Act and Regulations as if they were legislation passed by those states in respect of aviation activities relative to aviation safety issues. The States retained the power to regulate on economic issues in respect of aviation issues within each state.

In 1938 the Civil Aviation Branch became a Government Department in its own right known as the **Department of Civil Aviation** (DCA) following some accidents in NSW. The organisation was headed by Mr Arthur Brownlow Corbett as Director-General of Civil Aviation from April 1939 until his retirement in August 1944. From June 1946 to December 1955 the Director-General was **Richard Williams**, a former **Royal Australian Air Force Chief of the Air Staff** and Mr Donald George Anderson (later Sir Donald) held the position of Director-General from

January 1956 until September 1973. Many other very qualified people have since followed them in this role but under differing titles. As a political initiative, it was then amalgamated with the Department of Transport (DOT) to become a division of that Department. However, time proved that move not to be in the best interests of aviation safety and in 1995, aviation safety was largely removed from that organisation and became two organisations. One of these new organisations was the Civil Aviation Safety Authority and the other providing air navigation and aviation rescue fire fighting services became Air Services Australia, each under its own separate Act and Regulations of the Australian Parliament.



Australian Government

Civil Aviation Safety Authority



Whilst the regulation of airport standards was retained in the Civil Aviation Safety Authority, the day to day operation of capital city airports was leased out to suitable private organisations on a long term lease basis. They were to find their revenue to run these activities in passenger/aircraft movement fees and the sub-leasing of space in the airport terminals and surplus peripheral land at the airports. The operation of other airports was left in the hands of local government or private organisations as applicable.

National Air Routes Creation in 1921

Whilst the initial actions of the Civil Aviation Branch were directed from May 1921 towards the issues of standards of pilots, aerodromes and aircraft, consideration was also given in conjunction with the Postmaster General's Department to the issue of approvals for subsidised air routes across Australia for the carriage primarily of mail plus some passengers.

Considerable public discussion took place over what the best way of achieving this and interest was then sought from commercial interests to carry out this role. There was intense



interest by various interested parties in Eastern Australia to service the state capitals and larger centres.

There was also interest in this service activity in Western Australia.

Formation of Potential Outback Aviation Operators during 1921

This was the era where operators in the main tended to cease to be individuals and became companies, although the entrepreneur usually played a significant part in the initial day to day operations. There were a number of potential operators of such services in Australia at the time and two names primarily come to mind in that era from Western Australian and/or outback viewpoints. They were that of **Western Australian Airways Ltd** (later known as "Airways") led by Mr Norman Brearley, and **Queensland and Northern Territory Air Service** (later Qantas) based in Longreach, Queensland which as we all know is now a world airline. Others in WA to show interest during the following decade were Mr Charles Snook (later Airlines (WA) Ltd), Mr Horrie Miller (later MacRobertson Miller Aviation Co Ltd), Mr Edward Connellan (later Connair) and Mr George Lewis (later Goldfields Airways).

Qantas

Qantas was founded by **Hudson Fysh**, **Paul McGinness** and **Fergus McMaster** on 16/11/1920. Their first aircraft was an Avro Dyak and first office was located in Longreach as shown below.

In
the

initial years, the operations of Qantas focused mainly on providing ad hoc commercial flying services in regional Queensland and Northern Territory plus later that of providing aerial medical service aircraft to the outback in conjunction with the work of the Rev John Flynn from 1928. The fledgling medical service would eventually separate from Qantas and become a famous entity in its own right known today as the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia with bases throughout regional Australia. It provides a vital form of transport for those in the outback to take them to urgent medical attention in larger centres plus that of regular clinics at outback locations.

The vision of the initial directors of Qantas was large and in a few years, they had expanded to also form a series of airline routes within Queensland, NT, to Sydney and subsequently overseas via other Australian airports using a variety of sophisticated aircraft of the day and then onto jet operations we are largely familiar with. The war years of WW2 saw some very difficult flying by Qantas in the Asia/Pacific region in a variety of types of aircraft including flying boats in the Asia/Pacific/Indian Ocean regions .

After WW2, Qantas kept on with its international operations. The mainstream domestic airline industry in Australia however was then regulated through the now obsolete "Two Airline Policy". This was a policy of Australian federal governments from the late 1940s to the 1990s. Under the policy, with a few approved variations (eg East West Airlines), only two airlines were allowed to operate flights between state capital cities and between capitals and certain nominated regional centres. The main line services were operated by Trans Australia Airlines and Australian National Airways (ANA), the latter of which was later taken over by Ansett Airlines of Australia, led by Sir Reginald Ansett. TAA was later merged with Qantas in 1992.



With the demise of Ansett Airlines in 2001, Qantas became the major Australian airline domestically. This situation changed when Virgin Airlines Australia, which had only been operating in Australia with two aircraft up to August 2000, was given approval to operate domestically within Australia and thus provided some major competition to Qantas on domestic air routes.

Western Australian Airways

In Western Australia, most interest initially concerned subsidised mail/passenger flights between Geraldton and Derby via various other coastal locations en route. The proposed service was to start from Geraldton rather than Perth as the Government of the day was of the view that it would compete adversely with the railway service operating between Perth and Geraldton. Particular interest was shown in this proposed service by Mr Norman Brearley (later Sir Norman) who served in WW1 as a pilot. He was an avid aviator/entrepreneur and initially brought two Avro 504J aircraft with him when he returned to Australia in 1919. He then formed Western Australian Airways Ltd in August 1921 and was given approval in the same month for a return subsidised service between Geraldton and Derby. Norman Brearley recruited five pilots who were Val Abbott, Arthur Blake, Bob Fawcett, [Leonard Taplin](#) and [Charles Kingsford Smith](#) to conduct these operations.

After initially having a small hangar near the same site (see photo 1 below), Western Australian Airways Ltd built a larger hangar situated on what is now The Esplanade in Perth, near Government House (see photo 2 below). A lot of work was done by many others along the intended route creating landing strips at the intended destinations plus emergency landing strips. The creation of emergency landing strips was necessary as the natural countryside being traveled over was often not really suitable for an emergency landing.



Photo 1 – Geoff Goodall



Photo 2 Geoff Goodall

The first service duly (deemed a trial by the Government) departed Geraldton on 05/12/1921 and thus became the first scheduled airline service in Australia. The company went on to be known locally as “Airways” as shown in the sign on the roof in the photo above.





Photo – Geoff Goodall

The first flight as a trial consisted of three aircraft but one of them flown by Len Taplin and his mechanic John Trestrail encountered engine trouble near Murchison Station (Kalbarri area) and was forced to land. A second accompanying aircraft flown by Bob Fawcett circled them for a while but then it was seen to crash into the bush nearby. Taplin and Trestrail rushed to the site but Fawcett and his mechanic Edward Broad passed away due to their injuries within a few minutes of their arrival. See link below from the ABC for the complete story and memorial to them built in the bush. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-12/murchison-air-crash-grave-revamp/10221318>. The service ceased for a period but started again a little while later.

The service developed to include a main route between Perth and Derby via ports after the Government relaxed its opposition to an air service between Perth and Geraldton.

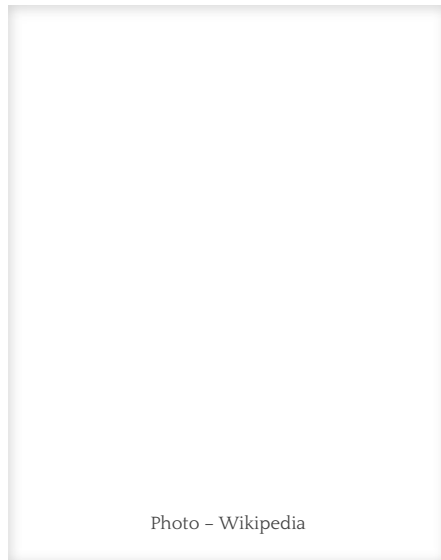


Photo – Wikipedia

These services also gave opportunities to provide services to station properties along the way between the two terminals at each end. Flying in the outback was often a difficult task with various unknowns at times like rough bush airfields, thunderstorms, fuel and various issues related to weather.

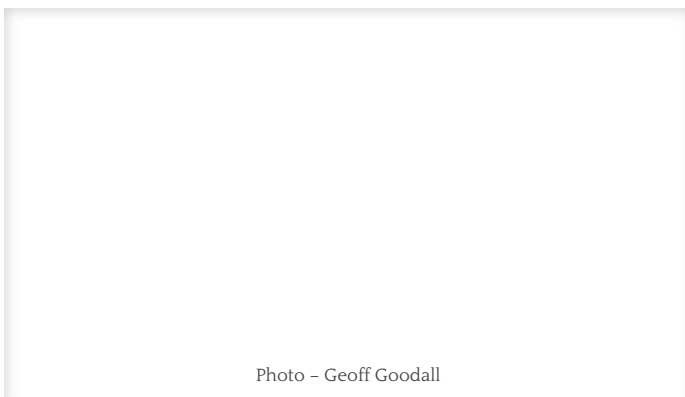


Photo – Geoff Goodall



The companies also earned some extra income from displaying advertising on the outside of the aircraft.



Photo – Geoff Goodall

This Bristol Air Tourer era of Western Australian Airways had a number of accidents including the one in which a Civil Aviation Branch inspector (Mr Stanley Harold Harper) passed away later in hospital owing to there being no doctor available to attend to his injuries sustained in an accident at Port Hedland. The aircraft in which he was a passenger made contact with part of a fence at the old Three Mile airfield in January 1923 and crashed as shown below. He lays at rest in the Port Hedland Pioneer Cemetery.

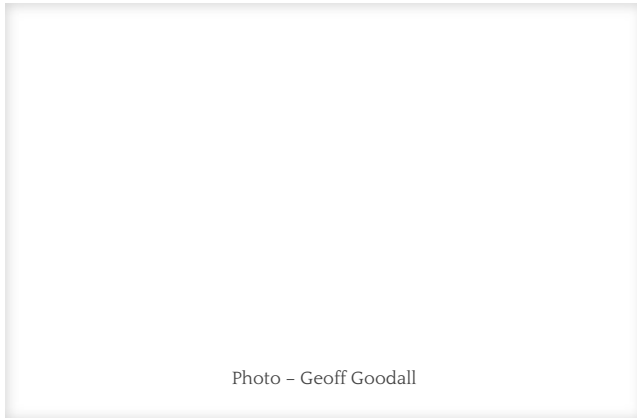


Photo – Geoff Goodall

By 1924, services to the north west by West Australian Airways included the DH50A aircraft.

The year 1927 saw West Australian Airways being awarded a government contract to create a flying school at Maylands aerodrome and this commenced operations in April 1927 with two DH60 aircraft and 33 students. The name of the school was the Perth Flying School and such was the demand for training that another DH60 aircraft was imported. The contract was



extended for a further year until the then fledgling Royal Aero Club of WA was able to take over what was to become one of the most successful clubs in Australia and still operates out of its newer premises at Jandakot Airport in WA. Mr Brearley became the founding President of the Royal Aero Club of WA.



Photo – Geoff Goodall

West Australian Airways DH.60X Moth G-AUGO at Maylands c1928, Operating for Perth Flying School – Photo Frank Walters Collection

Commencement of Interstate Operations by Western Australian Airways in 1928

In 1928, the Commonwealth called tenders for an airmail service between Perth and Adelaide and subsequently, airfields were constructed at the intermediate locations of Kalgoorlie, Forrest and Ceduna by the Civil Aviation Branch to accommodate this service.

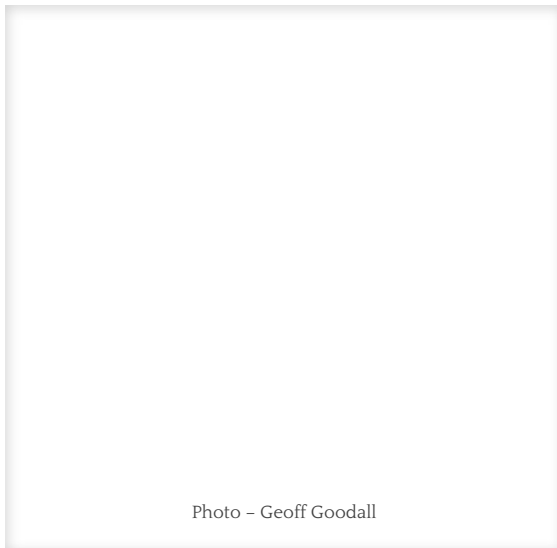


Photo – Geoff Goodall



Photo – Geoff Goodall

Approval for a return air service between Adelaide (Parafield) and Perth (Maylands) was then given to West Australian Airways Ltd to conduct a two day weekly service each way using a DH60 aircraft. The first flight left Maylands Airport in 26 May 1929. A hostel was established at the mid point in the flight at Forrest to provide overnight accommodation for the crew and



passengers. A number of beacons were established along the route to provide navigational assistance as required at night in a landscape which can be very desolate in parts.



West Australian Airways Ltd 1934 to 1936

Despite many years of operations within Western Australia, on 19/04/1934 the Commonwealth Government decided to re-allocate what had become a subsidised Perth to Daly Waters mail service route to the MacRobertson Miller Aviation Co, then based in Adelaide. Thus, West Australian Airways was left with only the Perth to Adelaide route which was now unsubsidised. On 12/06/1936, Adelaide Airways Ltd purchased West Australian Airways Ltd and on 01 July of the same year, both West Australian Airways Ltd and Adelaide Airways Ltd were made part of a new national operator Australian National Airways.






Sir Norman Brearley

During WW2, Sir Norman joined the RAAF and served as the Commanding Officer of a number of flight training schools. He was appointed CBE in 1965 and was knighted in 1971, publishing his autobiography “Australian Aviator” during the same year. He was a member of the Rotary Club of Perth from 1926 to 1989 and was awarded the Oswald Watt Gold Medal in 1973.

Sir Norman passed away on 9 June 1989 and a bust of him is displayed at Perth International Airport (domestic access) in his honour. He is memorialised at Karrakatta Cemetery.

Bio

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Moya Sharp

My name is Moya Sharp, I live in Kalgoorlie Western Australia and have worked most of my adult life in the history/museum industry. I have been passionate about history for as long as I can remember and in particular the history of my adopted home the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia. Through my website I am committed to providing as many records and



photographs free to any one who is interested in the family and local history of the region.

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